



Protecting Wildlife for our children's future



TESTIMONY OF KIT FISCHER

ON HOUSE BILL 396

MONTANA SENATE FISH AND GAME COMMITTEE

MARCH 19, 2013

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am Kit Fischer, the sportsmen's outreach coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation, based in Missoula. Thank you for this opportunity to speak in opposition of House Bill 396.

HB 396 asserts that counties, not Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, should have the authority to manage wildlife in the public's trust. But Why? Counties are ill-equipped to make decisions that have constitutionally been given to FWP and have no role in the state's management of wildlife.

Counties and local residents do, however, play a significant and valuable role in providing on-the-ground information and feedback so FWP can develop the best management plans possible. The current FWP statewide bison management planning process in place will give deference to local working groups once established. But for the counties to have the legal authority to say yea or nay in regards to an individual wildlife species is a vast overreach of county authority and would be virtually impossible to enforce.

What happens if Park County says "no wild bison?" Does that mean that the entire IBMP goes away and we end up back in court? Park County Commission has been the lead litigator on the Yellowstone bison issue; it is not unreasonable to think that this bill, if passed, would lead to a slaughter similar to what we experienced in the 1980's. That's unacceptable and it will bring Montana back into the courts on an issue that we will very likely lose.

As we've all seen around Yellowstone, bison don't know boundaries very well. What happens if one county wants Bison and an adjoining one doesn't? Will that County then fence off the County Line?

As Montanans, we've all come to expect that wildlife is a part of our lives. Rathbone and Sackman both indicate that wildlife is a condition of living in Montana. Judge Phillips made that same decision regarding bison. The State manages wildlife, but wildlife is not owned by anyone or any government. It is like the air and water, held in stewardship by the state under our state Constitution.

While the intent of this bill is understandable, in giving local control over the transplantation of bison, it sets a dangerous precedent for our state's wildlife—especially when two recent polls have found 70% of Montanans support bison restoration to some level. As Montanans we should be working together to find solutions to our most complex wildlife issues, and not simply shutting the door on them.